DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 653 CS 506 674

AUTHOR Harmon, Mark D.
TITLE Featured Persons in Local Television News.
PUB DATE 12 Aug 89
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (72nd, Washington, DC, August 10-13, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Broadcast Television; Content Analysis; News Media; *News Reporting; Television Research
IDENTIFIERS Local Media; Local News; *News Sources; News Stories; Ohio (Cincinnati); Television Networks; *Television News

ABSTRACT

Investigating persons viewed on local television news (other than anchors and reporters), a study examined 810 local television news stories from 1986 to 1987 from a national sample drawn from the files of a news consultant, and 543 stories (34 newscasts) from Cincinnati, Ohio, network affiliate newscasts in the summer of 1987. The unit of analysis was the individual news story. Featured persons (including elected and appointed public officials; heads of agencies, unions, and large businesses; and local or national celebrities or entertainers) were categorized as either known or unknown, and as being active in either the public or private sector. Findings revealed that, compared to national newscasts, local reports less frequently featured the quotes of "knowns," most notably the executive branch in the public sector. However, like national reporters, local television reporters had favorite sources who appeared frequently. (MM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED307658

ABSTRACT

FEATURED PERSONS IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS

Mark D. Harmon, School of Mass Communications, Texas Tech Univ., Lubbock, TX 79409, (806) 742-3382, presented to the Radio-TV Journalism Div., AEJMC, national convention, Aug. 12, 1989.

This analysis looks at persons both seen and heard (other than anchors and reporters) in a random sample of local television newscasts. The author examines 810 local TV news stories (1986-1987) from a national sample drawn from the files of a news consultant, and 543 stories from Cincinnati network affiliate newscasts in the summer of 1987. Regarding the second sample, the author was present for newscast preparation.

The findings demonstrate that, compared to national newscasts, local reports less frequently feature the quotes of knowns, notably the executive branch. Gans, in Deciding What's News, found that knowns comprised 71 percent of all persons quoted in network television newscasts. This report indicates the opposite tendency, only 32.7 percent of all featured persons were knowns. However, like national reporters, local TV reporters have favorite sources who appear frequently. In Cincinnati, the favorite sources were the mayor and two outspoken council members.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mark Harmon

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS506674

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FEATURED PERSONS IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS

MARK D. HARMON
SCHOOL OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS
TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY
LUBBOCK, TX 79409
(806) 742-3382

PRESENTED TO THE RADIO-TELEVISION
JOURNALISM DIVISION, AEJMC
NATIONAL CONVENTION, AUG. 12, 1989

FEATURED PERSONS IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS

One hardly can pick up a journalism trade magazine such as The Quill, Washington Journalism Review, or Columbia Journalism Review without seeing an ad from some organization offering names and phone numbers of potential sources to journalists. Journalists must, of course, evaluate the expertise and point of view of those sources, but the aim of the organization is clear. If one can get onto the rolodex of a journalist, then one is more likely to be quoted in an article or broadcast report--gaining an audience for one's point of view.

Public relations practitioners have known for a long time that the key to having a story told is to be sought as a source. One could look at this question of "whose story is being told" in many ways, but an underexplored question is the "who" element in local TV news, the persons featured by being quoted on the air.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Surprisingly few content analyses have looked at the question of the who element in any aspect of television news. Herbert Gans analyzed 1290 network news stories in 1967. He found that 71 percent of the people in news stories were "knowns," established and recognized figures in and out of government. Unknowns comprised 21 percent of the total; eight percent of the time the subject was an animal, object, or abstraction. Gans reported similar totals for newsmagazine columns in 1967, 1971, and 1975.[1]

Gans also noted that incumbent presidents, presidential candidates, plus leading federal, state, and local officials comprised the majority of knowns. Unknowns in the news mostly were protestors, rioters, strikers, or the victims of crime or disasters. Other unknowns getting some attention were: alleged or actual violators of laws or mores, survey respondents, or participants in unusual activities.[2]

The who question also arises in a content analysis of network economic news from 1973 to 1983. Using the Vanderbilt network TV news archives, Stephen D. Reese and John A. Daly created a sample of 755 newscasts, 2,531 separate economic reports.[3] The researchers, among other things, examined Richard Rubin's contention that television news "politicizes" economic stories[4] Reese and Daly found that 37 percent of the total reports coded were about the economic activities of the government--compared to 38 percent about the private sector, nine percent about indicators, and 16 percent about foreign economic reports. The Reese and Daly findings lend some support to the politicization charge, though the authors point out that the charge probably should be "executivization" since the president and his branch were mentioned 81 percent of the time government action was included.[5]

If recent research by Joe S. Foote is correct, then the gatekeeping tendency of executivization may run contrary to audience interest. Foote examined ratings information on 186 presidential addresses, news conferences, televised speeches, and State of the Union messages from 1969 to 1986. Foote documents a decline in audience that exceeds even the dropoff in network

share of prime time audience for the time period in question. President Reagan averaged only 61 percent of people watching prime-time television--compared to 77 percent for Jimmy Carter and 79 percent each for Gerald Ford and Richard Nixon. Foote is tempted to blame voter apathy or estrangement from the political process, but he properly cautions he cannot rule out some factor unique to Ronald Reagan or his administration.[6]

Foote has pointed out that there are favorites even among the knowns on Capitol Hill. Using material from the Vanderbilt archives, Foote established how many times each member of Congress appeared in network newscasts or was mentioned on the programs in 1985 and 1986. He created three categories--an elite group of "annointed ones" who appeared regularly (Senators Bob Dole, Edward Kennedy, Robert Byrd, and Jesse Helms, plus House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill), "surfers" who ride on key issues or committee charimanships (such as Sen. Richard Lugar, intelligence committee chairman during the Filipino election controversy), and the "untouchables." Regarding the last category, Foote found 48 percent of the members of the House went unmentioned in 1985, 43 percent in 1986.[7]

Unfortunately, all of these content analyses have looked at network TV news. The habits evident in local TV newscasts have not been documented, with one notable exception. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, better known as the Kerner Commission, completed a massive analysis of the urban riots of 1967--including a content analysis of news coverage.

The Commission documented the sources used on-air in both

local and network newscasts. The analysis covered a period three days before and three days after riots in each of 15 cities. The cities represent a cross-section of the locations, scales, and dates of the riots. A total of 955 network and local sequences were reviewed.

The Kerner Commission found that networks and affiliates aired roughly one-third of their riot stories on the first day and, regardless of whether the riot lessened or worsened, the coverage then decreased dramatically. The Commission found that coverage presented a "three-way alignment" of Negroes, white bystanders or property owners, and public officials or enforcement agents. Only 4.8 percent of the scenes dealt with mob action (perhaps because of danger or restricted access); 53.8 percent of coverage dealt with the aftermath and riot control.

Overall, the Kerner Commission found that the "who" element of this story was the white man's point of view. The coverage was calm and factual but stressed confrontations between whites and Negroes rather than underlying slum problems, grievances, and tensions. Excluding officials and police, black male adults were presented at a ratio of 2:1 over white male adults, a surprisingly low ratio considering the events took place in nearly exclusively black ghettos.

The Commission also looked at the coverage of Negro leaders, using three categories: celebrities or public figures, moderate leaders, and militant leaders. Negro leaders appeared infrequently on the networks, but in roughly equal parts for the three groups. Negro leaders appeared more frequently on the local newscasts. Moderate leaders were twice as likely to be

shown as celebrities, and three times more likely to be shown than militants.[8]

If the national observations translate into local news, then knowns should outnumber unknowns, the executive angle will be sought, and certain regular sources will dominate the tally of featured persons.

METHODS

The tallies in this research stem from a 1987 participant observation study in Cincinnati, Ohio, television newsrooms. Three network affiliates, WKRC, WLWT, and WCPO, were visited in July and August of that year; 34 newscasts (543 news stories) were videotaped and analyzed. The figures are drawn from a larger study of gatekeeping in local television news.[9]

Cincinnati was chosen for several pragmatic reasons. Initially, it is geographically and culturally a crossroads of Eastern, Midwestern, and Southern influences. Furthermore, it is a medium-sized market, ranked 28th.[10] Also, based on six years of residence in the market, the researcher was able to identify all featured knowns in the stories who otherwise were not identified by name or title. Finally, the researcher was able to gain the cooperation of all three news organizations in observing newsroom operation and interviewing newsroom personnel.

The unit of analysis was the individual news story. For clarity's sake, the researcher did not attempt to categorize all persons mentioned directly or indirectly in news copy. Instead,

only featured persons were coded. Featured persons refers to persons other than reporters and anchors who are both seen and heard in the newscast. The known category refers to elected or appointed public officials, the heads of agencies, unions, and large businesses, and local or national celebrities or entertainers. The unknown category refers to all other private persons not fitting the above definition of known.

The researcher also kept track of the principal actor in each news story, both in the Cincinnati news stories and in a sample of 810 news stories from 1986 and 1987 newscasts randomly selected from the files of Audience Research and Development, a Dallas-based news consultant.

The public vs. private categorization deals with another aspect of the who element. The public sector was divided into the executive, legislative, and judicial functions of government (with a separate executive category for police, fire, or paramedic actions; and another separate cateogry for military actions). The private sector was divided into: non-profit groups and charities, religious groups, entertainment and entertainers, business, and laborers (organized and unorganized), and an "other" category.

RESULTS

The findings demonstrate how conclusions about national newscasts cannot be generalized to local newscasts. When one examines the Cincinnati sample of featured persons (both seen and heard in news stories), Gans' point about the dominance of knowns

falls apart. Of the 543 stories evaluated, 435 had no featured knowns; 389 had no featured unknowns. Of those who were featured, a total of 145 were knowns. More than double that number, a total of 298, were unknowns.

TABLE 1. FEATURED PERSONS IN LOCAL TV NEWS

Featured Knowns Per Story	Number of Stories	Total # of Known Persons	Featured Unknowns Per Story	Number of Stories	Total # of Unknown Persons
0	435	--	0	389	--
1	84	84	1	76	76
2	13	26	2	45	90
3	9	27	3	18	54
4	2	8	4	6	24
5	0	0	5	4	20
6	0	0	6	2	12
7	0	0	7	2	14
8	0	0	8	1	8
	543	145 (32.7%)		543	298 (67.3%)

Furthermore, Rubin's point about "executivization" of the news does not translate well into local newscasts. Only 16.2 percent of the Cincinnati sample and 14.3 percent of the national sample had the executive branch as the principal actor. However, those totals blossom to 41.6 percent and 35 percent respectively if one includes the police/fire/paramedic/coroner category and the military category under the executive branch.

TABLE 2. PRINCIPAL ACTORS IN LOCAL TV NEWS REPORTS

PUBLIC	National #	National %	Cincinnati #	Cincinnati %	Combined #	Combined %
Executive	116	14.3	88	16.2	204	15.1
Police/Fire	145	17.9	118	21.7	263	19.4
Legislature	76	9.4	38	7.0	114	8.4
Courts	72	8.9	74	13.6	146	10.8
Military	23	2.8	20	3.7	43	3.2
TOTALS	432	53.3	338	62.2	770	56.9

PRIVATE	National #	National %	Cincinnati #	Cincinnati %	Combined #	Combined %
Non-Profit	33	4.1	16	2.9	49	3.6
Religious	21	2.6	4	.7	25	1.8
Entertainment	64	7.9	51	9.4	115	8.5
Business	62	7.7	52	9.6	114	8.4
Labor	27	3.3	7	1.3	34	2.5
Other	171	21.1	75	13.8	246	18.2
TOTALS	378	46.7	205	37.8	583	43.1

The Cincinnati sample verified Foote's point about favored sources, occasional sources, and nearly invisible sources, this time in local government. Mayor Charlie Luken appeared eight times; he also serves as a councilman. Two other councilmen, Steve Chabot and Ken Blackwell, appeared six and three times respectively in the 34 newscasts analyzed for this report. The six other councilmen and the city manager did not appear.

State government also was nearly invisible. Gov. Richard Celeste was seen and heard twice, the only state official to

appear. Only once was a commissioner of Hamilton County, which includes Cincinnati, featured in a report, though several other judicial and executive officers of the county were quoted.

Among the occasional sources, "surfers" to use Foote's term, was Joe Deters, an assistant Hamilton County prosecutor handling a big multiple-murder case, appearing four times. Among the national surfers, former National Security Adviser John Poindexter appeared five times based on his Iran-Contra testimony.

Regular local sources were: Ron Turner, mayor of nearby Covington, Hamilton County Sheriff Simon Leis, and Cincinnati Police Chief Larry Whalen, three appearances each. Each of these persons was well known to local TV reporters as blunt, quotable, and usually willing to speak.

DISCUSSION

One cautionary note must be made about the use of Cincinnati as a case study. In almost all aspects of the larger gatekeeping study, the Cincinnati figures neatly paralleled the national sample of 810 news stories drawn from 58 newscasts from all over the country. The one exception was state news. Cincinnati was unlike the national sample in that almost no attention was paid to state news. Cincinnati, just across the Ohio River from Kentucky and only a few miles from Indiana, long has a history of little state identification.

WCPO's news director, Jack Cahalan, told the researcher that he doesn't report regional news or "state house stuff" unless

it's something like "18 people dead on the state house lawn."[11] Even the city's bicentennial slogan, Cincinnati USA, left out Ohio. The dearth of state sources thus may be unique to this market. The other patterns, however, are likely to be repeated elsewhere.

No significant racial unrest occurred during the survey period, so the author was unable to update the conclusions of the Kerner Commission. Nevertheless, a 1980 documentary in Miami, Race Against Prime Time, found little had changed in local TV news coverage of urban riots.[12]

The conclusions from past research, the national "who element" studies, must be revised and clarified to apply to local TV news. Local newscasts are not as preoccupied as national newscasts with direct quotes from knowns, notably elected or appointed public figures. However, as with national broadcast journalists, local TV journalists have favorite sources, sources who ride the coat tails of stories, and sources who rarely, if ever, are sought. Local TV news also does not seek the executive's point of view, the way national newscasts go to the White House. The executive branch of local government does get some attention, but largely due to significant coverage of police and fire departments as part of crime stories.

NOTES

1 Herbert J. Gans, Deciding What's News (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979) p. 9.

2 Ibid, pp. 10-15.

3 Stephen D. Reese and John A. Daly, paper presented to the Radio-TV Journalism Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication 1986 conference, Norman, Oklahoma, August 1986, p. 4.

4 Richard L. Rubin, Press, Party and Presidency (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

5 Reese and Daly, p. 9.

6 Joe S. Foote, paper presented to the Radio-TV Journalism Division, AEJMC 1987 conference, San Antonio, Texas, Aug. 1987.

7 Andrew Rosenthal, "All Whom TV Deems Quotable," New York Times, Aug. 18, 1987, p. B6.

8 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, March 1, 1968, (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968) pp. 204-206.

9 See "Local Television News Gatekeeping," doctoral dissertation, Ohio Univ., June 1988.

10 Broadcasting/Cablecasting Yearbook 1987, p. C-158.

11 Interview with Jack Cahalan, WCPO news director, July 15, 1987.

12 "Race Against Prime Time," New Decade Productions, 1984. Available from New Decade Film Library, P.O. Box 315, Franklin Lakes, NJ 07417 (212) 431-7781.